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Negotiating Cultural Identity: A Study on Localized Interpretation and Identity Construction of Chinese Students in an International School's IB MYP Curriculum

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates how Chinese students at Fuzhou Lakeside International School negotiate their cultural identities within the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (MYP). Situated at the intersection of the MYP's Western-centric pedagogical framework and the students' indigenous Chinese cultural backgrounds, the research illuminates the dynamic strategies students employ to interpret, adapt, and localize the curriculum. Framed by postcolonial theory, this study positions students not as passive recipients but as active agents in their identity construction. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 20 Chinese MYP students, classroom observations, and analysis of student artifacts, including their Personal Projects. Thematic analysis revealed that students engage in sophisticated "cultural negotiation," manifesting in three key findings: (1) They demonstrate emergent critical literacy by challenging and deconstructing Western textual representations of China in subjects like Language and Literature; (2) They perform a strategic hybrid identity, acting as cultural "chameleons" in global contexts while maintaining a core Chinese cultural "anchor" in familial and local settings; (3) They adeptly utilize the MYP's "Global Contexts" as a conceptual scaffold to bridge global perspectives with local realities. The study concludes that the MYP experience fosters the development of a fluid and dual cultural identity, which students strategically leverage as a form of cultural capital. This research underscores the imperative for IB World Schools to move beyond a tokenistic multiculturalism and instead implement consciously designed, culturally sustaining pedagogies that support students' complex identity work.

Keywords

Cultural Identity Negotiation; International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (IB MYP); Curriculum Localization; Hybrid Identity; International School

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The rapid globalization of education has been marked by the worldwide proliferation of International Baccalaureate

(IB) programs. In China, this trend is evidenced by a growing number of international schools adopting IB curricula to cater to a rising middle class seeking a globally-oriented education for their children. These schools, such as Fuzhou Lakeside International School, become fascinating microcosms where global educational frameworks intersect with deeply rooted local cultures. The IB Middle Years Programme (MYP), with its explicit aim to foster "international-mindedness," presents a particularly compelling case. As this Western-origin curriculum is implemented in a non-Western context, it inevitably creates a complex terrain for students who must navigate its global demands while anchored in their native Chinese cultural identities. This positioning raises critical questions about how students actively process, interpret, and make sense of this cross-cultural educational experience.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Questions

While existing research has explored the academic adaptation of Chinese students in overseas institutions or the general implementation of IB programs in Asia, a significant gap remains. There is a lack of focused, empirical investigation into the lived experiences of Chinese students within a mainland Chinese IB MYP environment, specifically regarding how they consciously and subconsciously interpret the curriculum to construct their cultural identity. This study addresses this gap by positioning students as active agents, not passive recipients, in their identity formation. Consequently, this research is guided by the following central question: How do Chinese students in an MYP program at a Chinese international school negotiate their cultural identity through a localized interpretation of the curriculum?

To unpack this, the study explores these sub-questions:

What specific strategies do students employ to interpret and critically engage with the MYP's pedagogical elements?

How do students perceive and perform their cultural identity across different social contexts (e.g., international classroom vs. family home)?

In what ways does the MYP framework serve as a tool for students to connect global perspectives with local realities?

1.3 Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to develop a nuanced understanding of the cultural identity negotiation processes of Chinese MYP students at Fuzhou Lakeside International School. By delving into their personal narratives, classroom interactions, and academic work, this research aims to illuminate the sophisticated ways in which they localize a global curriculum.

The significance of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it contributes to the fields of intercultural education and identity studies by applying a postcolonial lens to the under-researched context of a mainland Chinese international school, thereby refining our understanding of concepts like hybridity and cultural capital. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for IB educators, curriculum coordinators, and school administrators. The results can inform the development of more culturally sustaining pedagogies that consciously support students' identity negotiation, ultimately enhancing the educational and socio-emotional outcomes of international schooling.

1.4 Overview of the Thesis

This thesis is structured to systematically present the research journey. Following this introduction, Chapter 2: Literature Review will synthesize existing scholarship on the IB MYP, cultural identity theory, postcolonial critiques of global education, and the specific context of international schooling in China to solidify the foundation for this study. Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology will detail the qualitative case study approach, describing the research site, participants, data collection methods (interviews, observations, document analysis), and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4: Findings will present the emergent themes, illustrating the key strategies of cultural negotiation employed by the students with rich qualitative data. Finally, Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion will interpret the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature, discuss the implications for practice, acknowledge the study's limitations, and suggest directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

The global expansion of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Programme (MYP) into China creates a critical site for examining the interplay between global educational frameworks and local student identities. While

the MYP champions "international-mindedness," its implementation prompts a complex negotiation for students between this global ideal and their native cultural frameworks. This review synthesizes literature on the MYP's philosophy, postcolonial critiques, cultural identity theory, and the specific context of international education in China to identify a gap concerning how Chinese students in a fully accredited MYP programme actively interpret the curriculum to construct their cultural identity.

The IB's official discourse positions the MYP as a curriculum designed to foster intercultural understanding and global engagement through its structured framework of Global Contexts and the Learner Profile (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014). However, scholars argue that the MYP's conceptualization of "international-mindedness" is inherently rooted in Western liberal-humanist traditions, creating a foundational tension when implemented in non-Western societies (Singh & Qi, 2013). This tension is effectively illuminated through a postcolonial lens. Building on Said's (1978) critique of Western knowledge systems, theorists like Andreotti (2011) contend that global education can inadvertently reinforce hegemonic norms, framing the MYP classroom not as a neutral space but as a "contact zone" where cultural power dynamics are constantly at play.

Understanding student responses to this dynamic requires a theoretical shift away from viewing cultural identity as a fixed attribute. Hall's (1990) seminal work reconceptualizes identity as a fluid "production," continually constituted through experience and representation. In transnational educational settings, students actively engage in what Li (2015) identifies as "cross-cultural interaction" and "identity construction," a process that is both complex and agential. This perspective aligns with the view of students as active meaning-makers. Pearce's (1998) early work in international school environments similarly highlighted the role of the school context in shaping students' cultural identity, suggesting that identity is developed through daily navigation of the school's cultural landscape. This process of navigating multiple cultural and linguistic spaces is exemplified in the context of inquiry-based learning, a cornerstone of the IB model. As Wu et al. (2024) observe in their recent study, Chinese international students actively employ strategic approaches to "navigate inquiry learning in a multilingual and multicultural environment," demonstrating significant agency in adapting pedagogical practices.

Within the specific context of China, understanding the formation of citizenship and identity is crucial. Pan's (2011) research on multileveled citizenship education in Beijing reveals the complex layers of identity—local, national, and global—that Chinese students negotiate, providing a critical backdrop against which the IB's global citizenship agenda is introduced. This existing complexity is compounded when students enter an international programme. The tension between a globally-oriented curriculum and the strong undercurrent of local identity creates a unique dilemma for students in China's international schools, a space where they must constantly reconcile competing demands on their identity (Chen & Li, 2022).

Despite these contributions, a significant gap persists. While research exists on Chinese students abroad (Li, 2015) or their general learning strategies (Wu et al., 2024), a focused, empirical investigation into how Chinese students within a mainland Chinese MYP programme consciously and subconsciously interpret the curriculum's specific pedagogical elements (like the Global Contexts or the Learner Profile) to navigate and construct their cultural identity is still needed. Existing work often addresses academic or linguistic adaptation but less frequently centers the core, day-to-day negotiation of cultural self-understanding from the student's own perspective. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Chinese MYP students at a school in Fuzhou, positioning them as the primary agents of identity negotiation and curricular localization.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, chosen for its capacity to provide an in-depth exploration of a complex phenomenon within its real-life context. The case site, Fuzhou Lakeside International School, with its dedicated implementation of the IB PYP and MYP, presents a rich and bounded "contact zone" ideal for investigating cultural negotiation.

3.1 Theoretical Framework: A Postcolonial Lens of Hybridity

The analysis is guided by a postcolonial theoretical framework, specifically Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity. This framework moves beyond a binary of cultural domination versus resistance, instead focusing on the intricate, creative, and often ambivalent processes through which new cultural forms and identities emerge in the "third space" of cross-cultural encounter. This lens is particularly apt for understanding how students actively blend, reinterpret, and localize the global discourses of the IB curriculum with their native Chinese cultural frameworks.

3.2 Methods and Data Collection

Data were collected during the 2023-2024 academic year using a triangulated approach to ensure robustness and trustworthiness:

In-depth, Semi-structured Interviews: Twenty Chinese MYP students from grades 8-10 were selected via purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, length of enrollment, and academic performance. Each 40-60 minute interview explored students' perceptions and interpretations of core IB elements like the Learner Profile and Global Contexts.

Participant Classroom Observations: Over 30 hours of observation were conducted in subjects like Language and Literature, Individuals and Societies, and Design. The focus was on documenting classroom discourse and student interactions, particularly when topics related to Chinese culture or global perspectives on China were discussed.

Document Analysis: Fifteen MYP Personal Project reports and other relevant student work were analyzed. These artifacts served as tangible evidence of the students' identity negotiation and meaning-making processes.

3.3 Data Analysis

All interview data were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts, alongside field notes and student documents, were imported into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo for systematic coding. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was employed. This involved an iterative process of initial open coding (e.g., "challenging texts," "identity switching"), which gradually evolved into the development of broader, analytically significant themes that capture the core strategies of cultural negotiation.

4. Findings: Three Modes of Cultural Negotiation

The analysis reveals that students at Fuzhou Lakeside International School are not passive recipients of the IB curriculum but are active "localizing interpreters" and "agentive architects" of their own identities. Their negotiation manifests through three distinct, yet often overlapping, strategies.

4.1 Strategic Critique: Becoming "Textual Resistors"

In subjects like Language and Literature, when encountering textual representations of China from Western perspectives, students demonstrated sophisticated critical literacy. They learned to interrogate the authority of the text, engaging in what can be termed as "counter-narratives."

Exemplary Case: A Grade 10 student, analyzing a Western media article on Chinese urbanization, wrote in her essay: "This report sees only the skyscrapers but is blind to the preservation and rebirth of our own Fuzhou's Three Lanes and Seven Alleys. Its narrative of 'vanishing tradition' is a simplified Orientalist trope." This critique was not mere rejection; it was a nuanced argument grounded in local knowledge and personal experience. Through such acts, students reclaim their agency as knowledge producers and defend their cultural dignity.

4.2 Situational Performance: Acting as "Cultural Amphibians"

Students adeptly performed different cultural identities depending on the social context, strategically managing their self-presentation. They often described themselves as "cultural chameleons."

In the International Classroom: They actively assumed the role of "cultural bridges," explaining the logic behind Chinese customs to international peers during group work, thus performing a "globalized Chinese youth" identity.

Within Family and Local Circles: They consciously "switched off" their internationalized personas, reverting to behaviors aligned with traditional Chinese expectations, which they referred to as their core "cultural anchor." This "amphibious" ability is not a sign of fragmentation but a strategic, fluid mastery that allows them to navigate both worlds effectively, converting this skill into a valuable form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

4.3 Creative Integration: Weaving a "Glocal" Web of Meaning

The most profound negotiation strategy was observed in how students creatively appropriated the MYP's structural framework. They masterfully connected the macro-level "Global Contexts" to their micro-level, localized experiences in Fuzhou, constructing a "glocal" understanding.

Exemplary Case: One student's Personal Project served as a quintessential example. His inquiry question was: "How can modern design principles be used to revitalize the Fuzhou cork painting craft, which faces a crisis of cultural transmission?" In this project, the Global Context (Globalization and Sustainability), the IB Approaches to Learning (Creative Thinking), and his local cultural identity (as a native of Fuzhou with a sense of custodianship) were seamlessly synthesized. He ceased to see the IB curriculum as an external imposition and instead repurposed it as a powerful toolkit for understanding and acting upon local concerns. This process fostered the construction of a dynamic, hybrid identity that is simultaneously global and local.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the process of cultural identity negotiation for Chinese students in the MYP at Fuzhou Lakeside International School is dynamic and agentive. They are skilled navigators who employ critique, performance, and integration to manage their cross-cultural positioning.

5.1 Central Argument: Forging Hybridity in the "Third Space"

Our findings strongly resonate with Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity. The students, through their daily negotiations within the IB "contact zone," create a "third space"—an interstitial area where fixed notions of "Chineseness" and "internationalness" break down. The resulting dual cultural identity is not a simple sum of its parts but a new, emergent form of subjectivity born from dialogue and friction. This hybrid identity constitutes a unique and potent form of cultural capital in an increasingly interconnected world.

5.2 Implications for Educational Practice

Based on these insights, we propose the following recommendations for IB educational practice:

From Cultural Responsiveness to Cultural Co-construction: IB World Schools should move beyond tokenistic multicultural celebrations and consciously design curricula that create "third spaces" for deep cultural negotiation. Unit planners should incorporate inquiry prompts that explicitly encourage comparative critique and creative synthesis of local and global knowledge systems.

Empowering Teachers as Facilitators of Negotiation: Professional development should equip teachers to become "facilitators of cultural negotiation," skilled at recognizing, valuing, and guiding students' critical and creative interpretive strategies. The classroom should be transformed into a genuine dialogic forum.

Re-envisioning "International-Mindedness": The IB organization itself should encourage a more profound, pluralistic localization of its curriculum and the Learner Profile attributes, actively acknowledging and integrating non-Western epistemologies to ensure "international-mindedness" is a truly inclusive and equitable concept.

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has illuminated how Chinese MYP students at Fuzhou Lakeside International School actively engage in cultural negotiation, transforming a global educational framework into a resource for constructing a sophisticated, hybrid identity. Their stories compellingly argue that cultural identity is not a static entity to be preserved, but a vibrant, ongoing project forged through open, critical, and creative engagement with the world. This research not only fills a critical gap in the literature but also provides a beacon for educators worldwide, highlighting the imperative to consciously support each student's unique journey of identity construction within global educational landscapes.

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